

# Digitize Your Collection

By KEN ALLEN



If you acquire art through galleries or auctioneers, chances are you already own color transparencies of your artworks. You also probably have paper files containing information about these objects, and likely have registered them (and their documented values) with an insurer.

## SO WHY DIGITIZE?

While digitization does not replace transparencies and papers, all pertinent data about an artwork can now be embedded in its digital image file, which can be backed up easily and transmitted instantly. If the digitization is done correctly, you will also have an image file that you can rent to licensing companies and publishers, or donate to museums and scholars. Digitizing protects your art from being handled unnecessarily, and you can consult the digital scan over time to see if your artwork's physical appearance is changing. By digitally recording your artworks, you are essentially giving them a higher standard of safekeeping.

I have been involved with photographic technology for more than 20 years — before the first digital cameras became available

commercially. Since then, I have watched the field of digital imaging grow exponentially. Today, I spend more than 30 percent of my time helping museums digitize their collections. Museums' enthusiasm is not just about making their art available online: Digital records also help safeguard and keep track of their objects.

## LICENSING

Digitization opens up licensing opportunities for museums, too. Edward Whitley, president of Bridgeman Art Library International, which handles licensing for more than 8,000 museums, galleries, and private collections, says that 95 percent of his transactions are now

GIDEON YATES (FLOURISHED 1825-37)

*PANORAMIC VIEW OF LONDON LOOKING NORTH BETWEEN SOUTHWARK BRIDGE AND LONDON BRIDGE*  
1831, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 16 1/4 x 28 IN.

GUILDHALL LIBRARY, CITY OF LONDON  
IMAGE COURTESY BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY





COMPARATIVE SCANS (HIGH AND LOW RESOLUTION) OF A DETAIL IN THE YATES WATERCOLOR

by transparencies. For large-format reproductions (e.g., banners), a digital file taken by a studio-quality digital camera can provide a superb image with no graininess and a wider range of colors than that achievable with film.

#### METADATA

Digitization is not just about creating a jpeg file. The digital image should be an open source format and formulated to contain the optimal amount of color information (see below). Almost any amount of meta-data can be embedded, including information about the artist, provenance, exhibition history, and conservation notes. A conservator can compare images made at different times to determine if the object has changed. (In fact, museums often use scans taken before and after an exhibition to see if any change has occurred while it was on display.)

SCREENSHOT OF METADATA EMBEDDED IN THE YATES WATERCOLOR'S DIGITAL FILE

electronic — that is, he sends digital files, not transparencies. A digital image is easier to send, and also easier for clients to resize to their requirements. Digital files at Bridgeman range from 50 to 165MB in size.

#### TRANSPARENCIES VS. DIGITAL FILES

For fine-art catalogues and other print formats where color accuracy is a priority, publishers usually prefer the color bar visible at the edge of a transparency, which allows them to color match the printed image. Today, this can be achieved with a color-matched print from a digital file, and since there is less color shift with a high-end digital camera than with film, the result is usually superior to that delivered

#### HOW TO PROCEED

At this time, there are no firm industry standards for digitization. Incorporating the guidelines proposed at recent conferences organized by the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration and the Society for Imaging Science & Technology, I recommend that you first create and preserve a *digital master*, then use *derivative files* for every-day needs.

A digital master is an uncompressed file, generally scanned at 16-bits for each red, green, and blue channel to create a 48-bit raw data file. Creating such a detailed file reduces the need to rescan in the future, and thus to expose your art to more light. Because this file is in an open source format, it will be readable for years to come. Any image adjustments (color correction, tone adjustments, and sharpening) are saved in separate layers so that all adjustments are reversible. The file size is generally large (50-250MB). The digital master should not be changed or edited at all.

Next, you can easily create disposable derivative files from the digital master. These are created for various short-term needs: High-resolution files are made for publishing and sales, and low-resolution for web and e-mail use. These files are often compressed — reduced in size to facilitate day-to-day usage, such as viewing them on slower equipment and networks.

#### THE BOTTOM LINE

So why digitize? I have five answers, actually: Accuracy. Security. Longevity. Income. Preservation. ■



KEN ALLEN is managing partner of Ken Allen Studios, LLC, a photography digitization firm that serves large and small clients. He holds a BS in imaging and photographic technologies from Rochester Institute of Technology, home of the Image Permanence Institute, and spent five years working at Eastman Kodak Company. Special thanks to Edward Whitley.